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LUCY GREEN: ROBOTICS QUEEN

BY PETER LAMB DEN

CHAPTER ONE

GIZMO

Lucy turned a few screws and pulled a few wires. She placed a banana carefully into the metal hand on the table in front of her. Its silver fingers gripped lightly.

“Ok, Gizmo,” she whispered, crossing her fingers, and looking over at her robot, “this time, easy on the peel.” She flicked a switch and a gentle hum filled the shed. Gizmo’s mechanical arm brushed past her hair as it moved to gently grasp the edge of the peel. A third arm buzzed past and began to pull the other side.

Lucy sat closer, holding her breath. “Yes, Gizmo!” she whispered. The robot slowly peeled the skin off and set it down onto the tabletop. Lucy punched the air in triumph.

“Alright, Gizmo!” she grinned.

You might say that Lucy wasn’t an ordinary nine-year-old. In fact, she was rather extraordinary. Lucy was an engineer - an excellent engineer. She lived with her grandmother, who had once been a software developer for a big computer company. Her grandmother had raised her since she was a baby and had taught her all the usual things that grandmothers teach their granddaughters. Things like how to tell the time, how to tie shoelaces, how to boil an egg, bake a cake, make pasta, and how to build robots using advanced cybernetics and mathematical communication theory.

Ok, perhaps that last one isn’t a normal thing for a grandmother to teach a granddaughter. But Lucy’s grandmother did it anyway.

Lucy absolutely loved building robots. She loved it to the point that she did nothing else. She had no friends, nor any other hobbies. She didn’t even seem to leave the shed, except to buy supplies and books. This was something that her grandmother always worried about.

“Lucy?” Her grandmother poked her head into the shed to see Lucy pointing at a peeled banana and smiling triumphantly.

“Grammy, I’ve done it!” Lucy cheered. But her smile didn’t last long. Suddenly there was a whine and a jolt, and Gizmo bashed his mechanical hand down hard onto the table, smashing the banana into a pulp.

Lucy and her grandmother looked at the pile of yellow mush that had been, until very recently, a banana.

“Oh, dear,” Lucy sighed.

“Why don’t you leave it for today, Lu-Lu?” Her grandmother said. “The sun’s shining and Gizmo isn’t going anywhere.” She paused for a moment. “I can hear children in the street...”

Lucy looked uncomfortable. She didn’t have any friends. Most of the children at school thought she was very odd. She thought they were odd, too; she didn’t really understand how to get along with people. It didn’t help that Lucy spent most of her free time around robots, and robots were extremely easy to get along with, given that they couldn’t talk. Sometimes, she thought that it might be nice to have *one* friend. She would love to be able to show Gizmo to someone. But then, why not simply build a friend? If she kept working on Gizmo for long enough, he could become her friend.

“No thanks, Grammy,” she said. “I want to keep working on Gizmo.”

“Then, at least let me help you?” her grandmother asked. Lucy smiled at her, and the two of them spent the rest of the evening in the shed, trying to build a robot that could perfectly peel a banana.

Later that night, the butterflies came.

CHAPTER TWO

BUTTERFLIES (PLURAL)

We've all seen a butterfly. They flutter around pleasantly, bringing pretty colours to a warm spring day. They're lovely.

Or, rather, *one* butterfly is lovely. Have you ever seen a *swarm* of butterflies? My guess is not.

During the early hours of one balmy night, Lucy's town was invaded by thousands upon thousands of butterflies. No-one knew where they came from, or why, and no-one knew what on earth to do about them.

At first everybody loved it; every colour of the rainbow dancing through the air like a dazzling snowstorm of summer (except, in this case, it would have been rather cruel to catch the 'snowflakes' on your tongue, and absolutely horrific to attempt to roll a snowball with them).

At school, the children were filled with excitement and energy. The teachers couldn't get the children to settle, so they took them outside to watch the many wonderful sights of the butterfly storm. Lucy loved it, too. It was unlike anything she had seen before.

But after a week or so the townsfolk started to realise that the butterflies weren't going to go away. What's more, they were starting to cause all sorts of problems. Nobody could drive anywhere, windows had to be kept closed, there was a constant danger of choking and, worst of all, they really tickled when they landed on your skin.

Then, one weekend, the Farmer's Union announced the biggest problem of all.

“Our crops are failing,” Farmer Wheat told the town, who had gathered in his field to hear the news. “Beautiful though the butterflies are, if they carry on like this there won’t be any food to eat.” He gestured around at the withered and broken crops.

Murmurs rippled around the crowd. It was a difficult situation. On one hand, the butterflies were living, breathing animals that needed to be treated well. On the other hand, they desperately needed to get rid of them.

Just then, a confident voice called across the crowd. Lucy, who had been listening quietly alongside her grandmother, strained on her tiptoes to see.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the owner of the voice - a dashing and handsome young man - bounded onto the small wooden stage and tapped Farmer Wheat’s microphone. It squealed.

“I’m an engineer!” he declared, “an amazing engineer!” Lucy and her grandmother caught one another’s eye. They both thought of an interesting rule they knew: if a person declared themselves to be amazing at something, then they probably weren’t. The crowd, however, hushed expectantly, to see what this stranger had to say.

“I can solve your butterfly problem,” he said.

REMAINING SYNOPSIS

The 'amazing engineer' is named Ivor, and he puts forward his designs for a fleet of robots that will patrol the town and remove the butterflies. Happy, the town rushes to agree to his plan. The blueprints for his robots are displayed in the town hall, where Lucy visits them and notices a large problem: Ivor's designs will seriously hurt the butterflies. Lucy and her grandmother begin to prepare an alternative plan, adapting Ivor's design to merge it with Gizmo, who himself is designed to be delicate. Unfortunately, during testing, Lucy's grandmother is stung by a bee and becomes too poorly to work. It is left to Lucy. Doubtful of her ability, she tries instead to warn the town, but they just want to be rid of the butterflies and don't take her seriously.

Sad and broken, Lucy spends her time at her grandma's bedside. One evening, a large group of children from her school arrive. They explain that they believe her warnings, and they want to help. She finds out that they're intimidated by her intelligence, and therefore they don't speak to her at school. They've now come to help because they can't stand the idea that the butterflies might get hurt.

The children all work as a team to secretly build the upgrades to Gizmo. Lucy doubts herself, given her previous failures with Gizmo, but the children reassure her. The new robot design is a success, and the butterflies are safely removed. To begin with, nobody knows that Lucy had anything to do with it, but Ivor realises what happened and tells the town that Lucy was the real hero.